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ABSTRACT

Four programs focusing on the school-community relationship and cooperation are described. The first illustrates how a building program was initiated in a Lutheran school in south Australia. The second focuses on the nature of parent involvement in a New South Wales high school and needed changes. The third program sought to guage parent opinion of school policy, curriculum, and environment and to increase involvement. The fourth program describes parent involvement in a small innovative community school and the extensive use of community resources to deal with problems. (DS)

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INTRODUCTION

The Schools Commission has promoted a policy of devolution since 1973 in four main ways:-

1. For individual teachers and schools there has been the support and encouragement of the Innovations and Disadvantaged Schools programs. Many of the activities noted in the 23 case studies published so far have had funds and advice from these sources. But it is worth noting that many teachers and schools have been able to take initiatives without special funds.

2. The Services and Development program and the Education Centres have provided courses, advice and help to individual teachers and parents as well as to interested groups and systems. Links with both programs have now been forged at national, state and local levels through conferences, workshops and courses. In Victoria and South Australia special consultants for community groups have been appointed with a view to enlarging access to resources. At the recent national Education Centres Conference the theme of school and community became a major one.

3. The Commission has sponsored national and state workships and conferences through the National Advisory Committee which is representative of systems, parents and teachers. Reports such as the School-Based Decision Making Report have been made available to schools. A second edition of the School and Community Bibliography is at the printers.

4. Special projects have been funded to undertake study and development work and to establish a network of people and resources throughout Australia. Details of such projects have been published in School and Community News recently.

Two projects have had a central function since 1976, both in terms of initiating of activities and of new developments. The one at the Canberra College of Advanced Education has been responsible for information collection and dissemination. The other 'twin' has been the Burwood project. This has produced Dr Fitzgerald's timely volume, *Schools and the Community: A growing relationship*, in August 1978 and 27 case studies written and developed by David Pettit working closely with special local correspondents. These studies have done much to make us aware of what is already happening in Australia and to provide parents and teachers planning initiatives with exemplars and strategies.

The case studies have also found their way into university and college courses for analysis and criticism by students and lecturers. Now I hear that at least three universities are putting them under the microscope of sociological appraisal. There is clearly a need, shown in the

replies to the School and Community project's evaluation, for a collected edition of studies available to all teachers and parents.

While the first series of studies, now concluded with this publication, necessarily concentrated on description it is hoped that a new series which will begin in 1979 will concentrate on processes, strategies and techniques, and pay considerable attention to systems and organisations as well as to schools. Details of a new series of monographs will also be announced shortly.

Patrick Brady

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The Tanunda Lutheran School South Australia

A BAROSSA COMMUNITY BUILDS FOR THE FUTURE

BACKGROUND

About half the population of the small town of Tanunda in the South Australian Barossa Valley is Lutheran. The congregations of the neat, white, spired churches see the local Lutheran primary school as the educational arm and expression of their faith.

The school, with its 151 students and seven teachers, is run by a school council. Members are elected from the five local co-operating congregations (or churches), who help support the school through a per capita contribution of their communicants, and the two smaller supporting congregations who have not made a major commitment but who give formal support to the school. The majority of students come from these congregations but a small minority of non-Lutheran children also attend.

By the early nineteen-seventies the school had a pressing need for new teaching areas to supplement and replace the ad hoc collection of buildings erected since the school's beginnings in 1843.

The new building committee, whose program is the subject of this case study, in its search for finance and support reactivated and extended many of the networks already existing between the school and its local community.

The Initiation of the Program

Over the last decade a series of unsuccessful attempts had been made to obtain new buildings for Tanunda Lutheran School. As part of the process of deciding on the type of buildings which were suitable, the Principal, Trevor Winderlich, the previous Chairman of the School Council, Roger Teusner, and other members of the council had made visits to other new schools, discussed designs with an architect and liaised with the teaching staff over desirable features. For a variety of reasons, essentially economic, the schemes had all failed to get off the ground. In 1974 the new School Council Chairman,

Geoff Munzberg, decided that the school had to build:

> ... the one thing I had to do was to get the school the new building that had been spoken about for so long.

Geoff Munzberg's prime aim was to have a school that was a good place to work in: consequently, most of the ideas for the building came directly from the school's own teaching staff. The principal was asked to supply a list of all the major features required in the new buildings after he had consulted with teachers. These needs were then considered in the light of contemporary Education Department building designs. The school's ideas were finally discussed with an architect. All of these discussions naturally had direct implications for the operation of the school and its curriculum. There was disagreement between the school and the architect over his plan for an open school, which the principal believed:

> ... didn't fit into our style of teaching, nor our philosophy either. I had to present that sort of educational discussion.

As Geoff said:

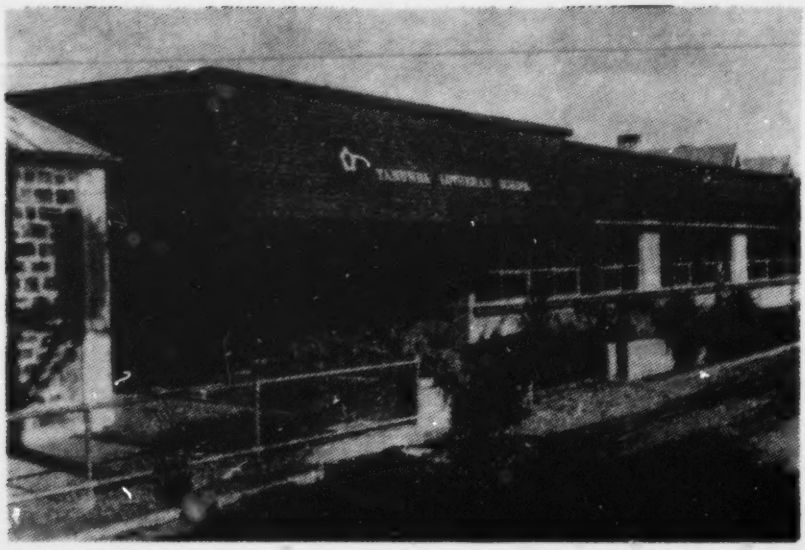
> We didn't want an open school. We used the same architect - last time he told us what he thought we needed and people tended to believe him - but this time we told him. We thought it best if we build a building that could be used as open plan to a point. We thought the most we'd ever be wanting would be for two teachers to share a teaching area. We wanted a library that was just a library and a separate art room.

During the negotiations with the architect the building committee made the decisions related to the building, and the principal was used as an adviser on all educational requirements.

In order that the building program should be implemented the building committee activated a series of relationships which the school already had with its own community and the Lutheran Church in South Australia.

Structures and Processes

The school is regarded as the Christian education agency of each of the local congregations. Their support is necessary before major developments can occur at the school. Each congregation has an education committee which provides some of the members to the school council, which consists of both parents of the school and some who are not parents. The school council, which is large and unweildy, has a small executive committee known as the Management Committee. From this were drawn the building sub-committee and



the appeals committee; in addition some extra people were co-opted for their specialist skills, as appropriate.

The management committee had two major tasks: to convince the congregations of the need for new buildings and to get them to commit themselves jointly and individually to provide the necessary funds. The groundwork for the first task had been accomplished in large degree during the unsuccessful attempts of the early seventies which had set people thinking about the needs for buildings.

Progress was taken in very small steps. Having got the congregations to agree that there was a need for adequate teaching and learning facilities, the building committee produced a ground plan from the teachers' guidelines. After discussion with the architect Geoff spoke about the plans to all the congregations who agreed to give their support.

One reason why previous attempts to build had failed was that the congregations had got used to thinking if there was no government grant the building could not possibly be financed. This time was different.

> If we got a government grant, that would be fine. But we needed the building that badly, if we had to we'd do it ourselves.

Each congregation formed an appeals sub-committee which arranged for visits to every family in the congregation. The school provided these home

visitors with literature and ran training sessions for them on how to present the literature and answer questions. In addition, they were shown around the school and had all the difficulties facing the school pointed out:

> When we got them to (tell people) the library was hopelessly housed, that water dropped down on it and the dust blew through and the classrooms were too small, they actually *knew* what it looked like ...

In addition, an appeal brochure was prepared and distributed.

The appeal was intentionally aimed at all members of the Lutheran congregations, irrespective of whether their child was at school or even whether they had children:

> A congregation is a group of Christian people who have a mutual concern for one another. And the responsibility of providing the children with a Christian education doesn't just rest with the parents but with the whole congregation. The business of running a Christian school is far too expensive for it to rest on the shoulders of parents.

An initial target of $50,000 was set for 1976 from personally guaranteed donations from all the congregations. The school provided special Tanunda Lutheran School building envelopes to each of the congregations, and as Geoff says:

> We made the start of building conditional on the kind of response - it was clear the support was there!

An additional fillip was the Schools Commission $20,000 library grant, with a time limit attached. A second appeal for $50,000 was launched the following year, again using the personal guarantee approach. In addition to the direct giving, members of the congregations were asked to make an ear-marked deposit for the school building fund in the Lutheran Layman's League, which then lent money to the school at a low 5 per cent interest rate.

A project of this size, which involved borrowing $170,000 and raising another $100,000 in gifts from a fairly small community, naturally created interest in the school. Attendance at school council meetings rocketed and many people came onto the site to watch the building progress. The school actively encouraged the interest by providing information in the Church Bulletins and inviting visitors to see the changes.

Problems

The appeal and decision to build took place at a time of fairly high inflation in building costs. The school council did not feel that it could accept a builder's 'rise and fall' clause, which could commit the congregations to expenses well beyond their means. As a consequence the decision was made to employ a large national firm as project managers for the building. The firm was able to guarantee the building at a price not to be exceeded and within a clearly specified time. As Roger Teusner describes:

> This created, in a small community, a certain division and hosility

from local builders and their supporters who claimed that tenders should have been called locally and a better price obtained.

For Geoff the major problem had been to convince himself that the new building was possible:

> Even I, when we started, really wondered whether we were going to see it right through to the end.

The voluntary work required to build is extremely time-consuming. Roger Teusner refers to the 'phenomenal work' and 'sacrifices' made by the committee which 'so many people just don't appreicate' and Geoff admits that 'I didn't really pull my weight as far as the (family) business was concerned' for a long time.

Even in a very strong Lutheran area there is not unanimous agreement that a church school is needed at Tanunda. Many Lutheran families choose not to send their children to a church school, believing that it is too cloistered or that a state school is provided in any case. This is despite their contribution to the school through their own congregation's subsidy. Not all the congregations have been equally in favour of the new building or supportive of the building appeal. Some families, especially those whose children have left or are leaving school, have been only lukewarm in their financial support.

Reasons for Success

Although it is possible to point out some specific cases of outstanding personal commitment made by members of the building committee, much of the

success of the program lies in the very nature of the community out of which the school grows:

> We regard the school as the extension of the home. The school is doing the things for us as parents that we really ought to be doing in our homes, but because of the way society has developed, is not possible. We give our children to the teachers so that the things that are done there are the things that are rightfully really parents' responsibilities in the home.

The principal in the Lutheran school is a church worker on a stipend, with the same salary scale as a minister, and as Trevor comments is '... generally regarded as a religious order without a gown'. In the school no distinction is made between teaching the Christian faith, which takes place daily, and, for example, maths, because 'the way I teach it and approach it, is my faith coming out'.

The teacher is regarded as the Lutheran community's authority on education. Lutheran teachers are 'called' to the school by the school council, in the spiritual sense of a calling, to be involved in the work of Christ in the school. They are expected to ensure that the teaching of Christain life and faith is carried out, in addition to implementing the secular program in accordance with the South Australian Education Department's curriculum. The school council encourages teachers to develop close bonds between the school and the parents through parents' visits and involvement in the school, consultation with parents, home visiting, and promoting the school in the congregation and with parents. There are parent-teacher discussion nights on extra-curricula and some curricular matters and the council have, with the teachers' help, provided parents with a booklet that helps them to prepare young children for school. The weekly newsletter is a further organ of communication.

In return, the teachers expect and receive assistance from the council and parents. The council keeps a cradle role of births, arranges visits to prospective parents and parents of prospective students, and is generally supportive of the teachers' work in the school. At Tanunda mothers help teachers in classrooms, especially where classes are large and teachers are few. Parents also help with transport. A result of this contact is described by a teacher:

> If Mum's interested, you get that two-way communication. It reflects on the children. If he's got a problem you can talk about it. Mum doesn't get too uptight at home, trying to help him. You've got that support and you're both working in the same direction - I think the school really fosters this.

Families also make a major financial contribution. Each co-operating congregation provides a subsidy to the school based on the number of communicants and all parents pay fees. There is a vineyard belonging to the school which is managed by parents and an annual fund-raising barbeque. The Welfare Guild, run by mothers, is a major source of funds for school equipment from its trading tables and annual luncheons. More recently the School Auxiliary, run by parents, has also raised substantial sums of money for general funds by organising barbeques, barn dances, bike-a-thons, and by assisting a local caterer. As a mother, Rosemary Gardner, says:

> The caterer pays $3 an hour, which goes to the school. If he needs 30 helpers and you put in four hours each, it's a lot of money. People not only go to help, they enjoy themselves.

In addition, all families are rostered to clean the school on Fridays, and on the last Thursday of the holidays there is a big working bee to clean right through the school. With this on-going commitment to the school and with the existence of permanent structures for management and for linking the school to the congregations, much of the infrastructure already exists when a big effort is required, as for the building program. All that is required is the catalyst.

Pastor Wilksch, the school's chaplain, pays tribute to Geoff Munzberg as the 'powerhouse behind the whole project'; Roger Teusner to Milton Helbig, the Treasurer, 'who could do forward bugeting and projection of costs as against projected income' for the crucial three-year period; and Trevor Winderlich to the whole building committee, which 'really had some creamy pieces in there who knew what they were after!' Geoff himself places great emphasis upon the need for the chairman to be a layman.

> In the past the school often used pastors as chairmen. Because these people have not got a continuing existence in the community I think they're justifiably reluctant to put a community into debt

when debt is generally what is required for a major project.

The strategies used to maintain support for the building program were very important. Because the people were kept fully informed of the sort of decisions they would be called upon to make and each decision was a logical step from others taken beforehand, the on-going level of commitment was very high. This is again an outcome of management skills.

THE FUTURE

The Tanunda Lutheran School community has, in Geoff's words, 'the evidence in our midst that God richly blesses the efforts of His people'. The future emphasis will be upon improving the quality of life at the school, the effectivness of the teaching and the relationships with parents to 'ensure that the children are brought up in the nuture and admonition of the Lord'.

The principal who takes over in 1979 will not be responsible for a particular class but for co-ordination of teaching throughout the school. This, it is hoped, will facilitate opportunities for teachers to improve their professional qualifications and status. It is also planned to obtain suitable teacher accommodation.

Fairly informal discussions have begun already between the teachers and the executive committee related to all aspects of life at the school. An important facet of these discussions is how parents can be involved to a greater extent in the life of the school. All these developments imply continuing parental and congregationsl commitment to the school which, the building program suggests, is present when a school is deeply rooted in the convictions of its community.

Lutheran Church, Barossa Valley

SUBURBAN HIGH

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN A NEW SOUTH WALES HIGH SCHOOL

SUMMARY

* Nature of parent involvement in Suburban High
* Restrictions to involvement
* Momentum for change

BACKGROUND

Changes in the nature of school-community relationships are essentially a long-term process. Although dramatic strides have been made in some schools these are exceptions from the general run of schools where policy changes have been more cautious. Of crucial importance in bringing about change are the attitudes of the staff and, in particular, the principal. For that reason this study focusses on teacher attitudes and actions in a fairly 'normal' state high school in New South Wales which has no exceptional qualities of school-community relationships and no particular tendency in that area. Some parent responses are also included.

Previously it has been the custom to name all case study schools. This Sydney suburban high school is not named as part of an undertaking to the Research Application Review Committee of the NSW Department of Education, whose approval and support is gratefully acknowledged. We are also indebted to the principal and staff of the school.

The case study is based on the results of discussions with the principal, deputy principal, seven subject department heads, two special masters, school counsellor, librarian, 23 assistants from all subject departments, including the two staff members responsible for careers advising, the president of the Parents' and Citizens' Association, a middle-aged man holding a responsible position in his place of employment and who no longer has children at the school, 10 other parents, including

five mothers who regularly assist in the school canteen, and one Commonwealth employment service officer.

The discussions were the result of 20 visits to the school between mid-April and early July, including attendance at the April (total attendance 14) and May (total attendance 11) Parents' and Citizens' Association meetings. The time during the early visits was spent reading school documents to gain background data for the interviews that followed on the later visits. The interviews for the most part followed a structured format at the outset, aimed at finding out:- what type of involvement existed between teacher and parent or parent and teacher; what changes, if any, were desired in the current involvement; and how these might occur. Frequently staff made comparisons with their experience in other schools. Great constrasts were drawn by the mistress-in-charge of girls and the science master, the latter appointed to the school at the beginning of 1978. They had each come from schools where many of the students were studying English as a second language and where they had experienced closer relationships with parents than at Suburban High School.

Discussions were held with the principal and/or the deputy on most visits to the school and with several other staff, notably the school counsellor, the English, science and social sciences masters, on more than one occasion. These discussions gave the opportunity to follow up points made in other discussions. They gave an opportunity for reflective comment by both parties. In addition, discussions were held with four parents on three occasions away from the school.

During the course of these discussions it became apparent that staff members became increasingly conscious of the need for more parent involvement in education. It was also obvious that some were unaware of the wide variety of ways parents have been involved in Suburban High School.

Suburban High School has an enrolment of 905 students. There are 59 members of the academic staff, divided among the following subject departments: English, history, mathematics, science, languages, social science, industrial arts, home science, music/art, sport, library. In addition, there are 14 ancillary staff.

According to a statement prepared by the principal for a school appraisal in 1975, the primary aim of the school is

> ... to create a congenial educational atmosphere for its pupils. To this end it is important to give staff the opportunity to involve themselves fully with the process of the education of the students.
>
> A teacher cannot be insular in his outlook and retreat within his subject sphere, but must support policies which help create an educational environment allowing the student to develop socially, physically and mentally and thus prepare him for his place in society ...

In general, the pupils at the school come from middle and lower income families who mostly own their own homes. The report for the school appraisal stated that parents expected the school to

> provide a congenial climate so that their children will be able to develop into well-adjusted citizens and, at the same time, gain such examination grades as necessary for their future vocation. Parental reaction to change varies with the type of change anticipated. Where it is obvious that benefits will accrue in the short term, the parents readily accept such changes, but there is a guarded reaction to moves which seem to overthrow what they experienced and approved of in their own schooling. For example, at a public meeting approval was readily given to a radical change in the sex education program at the school but, in contrast, quite widespread concern was expressed in such matters as the substitution of assessments for formal school examinations and the granting of special privileges for senior pupils.

The school has special charities it supports, namely, Stewart House and the Royal Blind Society. In addition, the students contribute to the upkeep of a Brazilian child, raising $196 per year. There is a school council which is the governing body for student complaints, having elected representatives from each year. It is the responsibility of one of the industrial arts teachers. In 1978 the school began a community service program whereby 30 girls who do not do sport visit homes for the aged. There is a great demand by the girls to be part of this program and their contribution is much appreciated by those in the homes.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SUBURBAN HIGH

Parents and other members of the community are involved in this high school in a variety of ways. Firstly, there is parental involvement in observational activities. These include attendance at open day, held in education week in August of each year, the speech night held in March of each year when prizes are awarded for academic, sporting and leadership skills, and there are items from the school choir and orchestra, and the

regular musical soirées where pupils from a very strong music department in the school perform, often with invited guest performers. The principal reported that, at speech night in March 1978, over 300 of the students were involved, attracting many parents while at a musical soirée held in June 1978 about 200 parents attended.

Some parental activities at the school can be described as instructional. Such involvement includes parent-teacher interviews, some being held where pupils are not making satisfactory progress. The monthly newssheet, begun in February 1977, is a further instance of this type of link with parents. It is given to pupils to take home on the second Friday of the month. The newssheet contains information for parents about changes in the administration of education such as have recently occurred in New South Wales concerning the Higher School Certificate; explanations of staff changes; notice of coming events in the school to which parents are invited, such as Parents' and Citizens' Association and Ladies' Auxiliary meetings; and notes on the various activities conducted by the subject departments in the school, such as reports of school excursions. The length of the newssheet varies from month to month according to need - in June 1978 it consisted of six foolscap pages giving in full the Secondary Schools' Board invitation to the community to comment on the School Certificate system in New South Wales.

Another form of parent involvement of an instructional nature is language nights. These are held each year and all students studying a foreign language at the school are invited to bring their parents. There is almost a 100 per cent student attendance and more than 100 parents attended the evening in 1977. The principal and the subject department head usually open the proceedings with a talk on the languages taught in the school. This may be followed by a film on, for example, Noumea, the centre for an excursion organised by the languages department. Parents then watch demonstration lessons with their own children in action in the language laboratory. The involvement of almost all students studying foreign languges in the school appears the key reason for the success of these evenings.

In addition, enrolment day activities are provided for the parents of year 7 children, informing them of the nature of Suburban High School. Parent-teacher nights occur for parents of year 7 students and those of

year 10 concerning the choice of subjects for their children in years 8 and 11 respectively.

A third type of parental involvement can be described as practical. Here parental assistance in the canteen may be included. Although the school canteen has a paid manager (a parent whose child has since left the school), all other staff are volunteer mothers. About 80 people are required each month to staff the canteen but this, in fact, means about 50 different people help out in the course of each month. This type of involvement is peripheral to the curriculum issues of the school but it is undoubtedly of a practical nature. Other examples of parent involvement of a practical nature are related to the school's teaching program. Firstly, the industrial arts department staff and students have had the advantage of practical assistance from a skilled woodwork craftsman. Secondly, other parents have been involved in the school's career education program, either by coming to the school to talk to small groups of volunteer students on their own careers or by facilitating visits of small groups of students to their places of employment. Talks by people from various careers are a regular feature of Suburban High School, the only proviso given by the principal being that they are not held in the same period each week. Careers advising is undertaken by two members of staff - one, a mathematics teacher, and the other, a social sciences teacher. They report increased interest by students in advice they offer, and they would like more parents to offer their help. Thirdly, several years ago, the school held a medieval feast and many parents of year 8 children spent much time preparing medieval costumes ranging from those of peasants to those of the aristocracy. This event may occur again in third term 1978.

A fourth category of parental involvement is that at the planning and organisational level of the curriculum. This type of involvement is very limited at Suburban High School. Four instances can be cited in the last few years. Firstly, it occurred with the introduction of the personal development course in 1975. In September 1974 a meeting of parents was organised by the special master responsible for the course. The proceedings of this evening are retained on a taped record and parent comments were used in the initial planning of the course, though not subsequently. Secondly, for the school appraisal, one of the special masters surveyed the opinions of parents attending a Parents' and Citizens' Association meeting, open day in education week, and the parent-teacher nights for

parents of year 7 and year 10 students on the aims of Suburban High School. In addition, 32 senior pupils were asked their opinions. There was general agreement between the two groups. They stated the primary aims to be:

* developing communicating skills
* imparting knowledge
* developing good person to person relations
* the cultivation of worthwhile morals and ethics
* the provision of vocational training
* the development of high standard physical and mental health
* arousing an awareness of civic rights and attitudes
* preparation for home and family life.

Parents surveyed also indicated they wanted to develop close links between parents and teachers. Thirdly, at the beginning of 1978, the school introduced integrated studies for year 7 students. It was preceded by a survey of parent opinion organised by the art master who is very keen to break down subject department barriers and to increase community involvement in the school. In third term parents are to be invited to see some of the results of this short course of studies. Fourthly, in February 1978, a questionnaire was sent home to the parents of every year 8 to year 12 students inclusive asking their opinions on methods of reporting student progress. The March newssheet reported that 632 of the 765 questionnaires issued had been returned with the majority, 85 per cent, voting for the retention of the *status quo*, namely, reporting the percentage and position in class, together with a teacher's comment.

However, with each of these four types of parental involvement, only a small percentage of the total parent population of more than 1500 takes part. Yet, as the President of the Parents' and Citizens' Association has remarked,

> ... there is more parent interest in the school than is evident by attendance at the P & C meetings ...

Why is there such limited parental involvement at the practical and planning and organisational levels in Suburban High School?

At least six groups of reasons are advanced to explain the current extent of parental involvement in Suburban High School. Chief among these

is that the school system is not geared to closer and more active parental involvement. While there have always been invitations to parents to visit the school at any time and to come for specific occasions such as speech nights, open days, and parent-teacher interviews, these invitations have not been designed to attract large numbers of parents. One young staff member indicated that there were no close links to parents as the teachers would really like to see. They want to see parents of those children who needed more help in their schooling than the teacher alone could provide. Another teacher stated that it was 'difficult' to involve parents.

Secondly, both staff and parents interviewed stressed that some teachers and some parents lacked the skills to promote more than token contact with each other. Young teachers have classroom management as their major responsibility and have little, if any, time in their pre-service teacher education to develop skills in meeting parents. However, in 1978, there are only three first-year out teachers. Some parents, on the other hand, also feel inadequate when faced with meeting teachers of whatever age. One mother who regularly works at the canteen stated:

> A lot of women are very shy, too frightened and lose their self-confidence; some are too frightened even to serve children at the canteen ...

In addition, another mother who regularly attends Parents' and Citizens' meetings and helps at the canteen stated:

> Everyone just seems involved with themselves!

while another stated:

> You grow up in awe of teachers - they are more educated than I am - but I know more.

Barriers exist because of the different backgrounds of the people concerned, but regardless of backgrounds involvement means giving, and as one articulate mother stated:

> People are always frightened to give a bit of themselves. (They have a) fear of ridicule ...

Thirdly, there is among some - staff, students, and parents - satisfaction with the *status quo*. The English master wanted to know how the school could 'disturb the complacency - everything supports complacency'. But, at the heart of this reason, is the student. At

secondary level, a major development task for the adolescent is the securing of independence from parents. Many are happy to have their parents well away from school. The head of the languages department, appointed at the beginning of second term but some years ago an assistant at the school, stated:

> ... students are an effective force in keeping teachers and parents apart ...

She made this point quite forcibly and it was confirmed by one mother who indicated that if she drove to the school for canteen duty her child wanted to be let out of the car well before the school gates. Yet there is normal adolescent ambivalence in this regard, as another mother commented that, although on the surface her child did not want her at the school, she felt, deep down, the child was really glad she showed such interest.

Some staff commented that parents 'seem not to be very interested', and another:

> that it is not the done thing for a lot of parents (to be involved with school affairs) ...

A mother commented that in the community as a whole there was lack of involvement and the fact that there was little parental involvement in schools merely reflected this state of affairs. Several staff and parents commented that, in too many families both parents were working when there was 'no need' for a two income family, but that this pattern simply mirrored an increasingly materialistic society. Time out for personal gain left little time to spare for involvement in Suburban High School. The usual and frequently justified comment of 'no time' was voiced by many teachers.

A fourth reason for the extent of current parental involvement is that the type of activities provided for parents do not appeal to the majority: hence only a small core regularly attend the functions and meetings organised by the school. In regard to the Parents' and Citizens' Association meetings, a parent stated:

> The P & C is boring: nothing is achieved. (We) don't get new people after the first meeting.

Another that:

> We don't seem to get them (the parents) involved quick enough - (we) go on with twaddle about money ... no one says 'hello'.

Or, as a number of staff commented:

> Everyone knows about P & C ...

The principal reported that the June meeting of the Parents' and Citizens' Association attracted 16 people. Its prime function was to discuss the Secondary Schools' Board's invitation to comment on the School Certificate system, advertised in the June newssheet. On the same night a musical soirée was held, attracting 200 people. There may have been a larger attendance at the Parents' and Citizens' Association meeting had it not clashed with the musical evening. It is hard to understand why they were both programmed for the same night. However, the attendance at the Parents' and Citizens' Association meeting was in line with that of earlier meetings in the year. It is apparent that such formal meetings do not appeal to the majority of parents and that the function in the school hall was far more attractive. The very small attendance at the Parents' and Citizens' Association meeting does not necessarily mean the parents were uninterested in commenting on proposals for change in the school certificate system.

The April and May meetings of the Parents' and Citizens' Association included discussion on money matters, notably problems with textbook supply and funding. However, at the April meeting there was also a summary from the deputy principal on the report, 'Sexism in Education', commissioned by the New South Wales Department of Education. Unfortunately, his summary came very late in the meeting and there was only brief comment on it, mainly by the president and the principal. The principal and the deputy were the only school staff present at this meeting so that there was no opportunity for parents to discuss the issues raised with a cross-section of staff.

A fifth reason is contained in material prepared for the school appraisal in 1975. For this appraisal, school aims and aims of each of the subject departments were documented. The first aim of the school was stated as:

> To provide an effective educational environment for the development of the personality and potential of the pupils and the professional life of the teachers ...

This aim was divided into three sections and it is the first of these sections that has particular relevance to this case study. In order 'to provide an effective educational environment' it was stated that the school aims to:

- foster co-operation between staff, pupils and parents in the community.

- provide opportunities for the involvement of pupils, teachers and parents in the decision-making process of the school.

Despite this school aim, it is only in the aims of the music area that there is any specific mention of parents and other members of the community. One of the aims of the music staff is stated as:

> To encourage through musical activities, communication and co-operation between the school and the community. Opportunities are afforded pupils on these occasions to learn to cope with new situations, to understand how society functions and to appreciate different social values, thereby assisting pupils to make more mature judgements on social issues ...

The home economics, needlework and physical education staff made statements which show their special links to the home and to the wider community. The home economics staff stated:

> It is considered that the pupil interest has been heightened by the wide use of audio visual aids and by the involvement of parents in some topics and assignments.

The needlework staff stated:

> Pupils' interests also have been stimulated in helping others less fortunate than themselves and in this respect, time has been spent on making toys for hospitals and garments for the Red Cross.

The physical education staff stated:

> It is obvious that the pupils engaged in competition sport derive a great deal of benefit, both physical and emotional from their experiences which they encounter in meeting similar groups from other schools and districts.

Other subject departments commented on the value of excursions as a means of enriching classroom learning. However, they did not have an explicit statement of aims linked to the first school aim. Nowhere did they explicitly mention parental involvement.

A sixth reason was advanced by two parents. They felt parents had lost respect for teachers. They wanted teachers to work a 9 to 5 day at their work place 'like everyone else'. Furthermore, they did not want teachers to be allowed to come to school and retire. They should be forced to move on. These comments complement that of another parent who wanted dedication on the part of all those involved in the process of schooling.

What evidence is there that teachers and parents want to change the current pattern of school-community relationships?

There is evidence at Suburban High School that there are both staff and parents who want a change in the current pattern of school-community relationships so that there is closer liaison between the school and the home and the school and the community. Five major reasons are advanced in support of the change.

Firstly, the recognition by many teachers and stressed by the school counsellor that:

> The kid isn't an isolated unit in the school ...

One teacher commented that it would be

> nice to talk to them (the parents) and find out a bit of background.

Several teachers indicated they would like to be able to 'call up' parents more easily.

Secondly, teachers are aware there have been many changes in education. Much public comment on education is misinformed as it is based on what happened a generation ago. Schools have changed in many ways, one simple indication being the number of aids available to a staff. As one teacher commented:

> ... (it is) very important that parents be aware of what is going one,

and another:

> I am of the opinion that parent views should be clear to teachers.

There was, however, the feeling expressed by some of the teachers, that changes should be the result of the views of the majority of parents rather than of a small but very vocal minority.

Thirdly, the school regularly requests parent assistance through the newssheet. Parents have been asked to assist in the provision of religious instruction, service in the canteen, and in the presentation of talks on canteens, as well as to attend the various functions initiated by the school.

Fourthly, there is a general recognition that the school facilities deserve longer use. Presently the tennis courts, soccer, hockey and net-ball fields are used by community groups out of school hours. These groups make only a token payment for the use of the school facilities, yet when the school uses outside grounds, such as squash courts, for its sports periods, it is required to pay the usual rates.

What suggestions are there for changing the current pattern of school-community relationships?

Staff and parents interviewed during the preparation of this case study report gave a range of ways by which the current pattern of school-community relations could be changed. These ranged from those requiring very simple changes to those necessitating major changes in the administration and organisation of the process of schooling in state secondary schools.

Firstly, it appears that it needs to become accepted in NSW state secondary schools that all parents be actively involved in a wide range of school activities from those peripheral to the curriculum to those central to it. To enable schools to have greater opportunities for increasing parental involvement the following suggestions were made:

- have a public relations day
- reduce the teaching load
- introduce staggered working hours so teachers have greater opportunities to see parents after normal school hours
- give teachers assistance in meeting parents by improving the communication skills of each
- talk to parents in a non-threatening situation about their aspirations
- reduce changes in the curriculum to allow teachers time to consolidate their teaching strategies
- appoint a community worker to a school or group of schools so home visits can be made by persons skilled in the art.

Secondly, the wide variety of opportunities already available for parents needs reviewing. Simple suggestions like providing name tags at P & C meetings and saying 'hello' to one another on arrival are made by a parent who is one of those regularly attending these meetings. She does not yet know by name the small group of other parents who attend. Several parents suggested there be more written communication about the school

sent home - 'post out the newssheet if necessary'. Physical education (P.E.) staff, in reference to written communication, suggested there be a place for their comment on school reports, at least for years 7 - 10, who all have two P.E. periods per week. As one of these staff commented:

> ... (we) see children in a different light. (They are) completely different away from tables and chairs - behave differently. Teamwork, co-operation and socialisation aspects (are necessary). (They need) to share equipment, have physical contact, consider other persons physically less capable and be careful in dealing with that person, particularly in the year 10 co-educational P.E. classes.

Yet, the two P.E. staff acknowledged that with present staffing policy they would find it nearly impossible to write individual comments on the 671 students in the junior school. This is despite the fact that they would like parents to have a more rounded picture of the process of schooling as it affects their children than they feel is possible with existing report forms.

Several parents suggested that very few parents were really aware of the enormous costs of texts used by their children. They commented that it was poor policy on the part of the school not to tell them, and that all books used in each year should be listed with their current prices, grouping the books according to subject areas. Each parent would then have the opportunity to work out the individual totals according to the subjects their children studied.

Other suggestions from several staff and parents were for the re-organisation of the 'dead period' after the end of year exams. In such a period parents could be enlisted to help teachers organise and provide a series of activities that would be to their mutual benefit, but that, more importantly, could extend the student's knowledge of the world beyond the school. Both parents and students are increasingly interested in obtaining advice on careers and the careers advisers and the president of the Parents' and Citizens' Association suggested that a co-operative teacher-parent program at the end of each year would be an advantage.

The need to review the existing pattern of school-community relationships is seen as requiring a combined initiative on the part of both teachers and parents. Students, too, must have a part to play. One young female staff member queried: 'As a staff, do we really try?' There was the suggestion to involve more than the prize winners on speech

night and so attract a wider audience. Yet more than the prize winners are involved as there are orchestral and choral items and an art display as part of the program. Finally, there were some staff and some parents who considered there should be more teacher-run courses for parents to introduce them to curriculum changes, to allow friendly discussion of these changes, and to help break down the barriers that exist between many teachers and the parents of the children they teach. Breaking down barriers by friendly informal discussions in a non-threatening atmosphere seems very important if teachers and parents are to have a closer, higher quality relationship with one another.

Thirdly, there was a suggestion to involve parents in the planning of the curriculum - specifically to improve the health of students by a co-ordinated effort linking canteen sales and the personal development and P.E. programs.

Fourthly, looking more widely at the system as a whole, came the suggestion for increasing the autonomy of the school. This suggestion is in line with Schools Commission policy. Linked to this was a parent view that schools in close geographical relation to one another should form a cluster for enabling more efficient use of limited resources. There are four other state secondary schools quite close to Suburban High. The same parent also suggested that within that area parents be allowed to send their children to the school they choose, thus giving them greater commitment to that school. It is notable that the school's student council already has as one of its objectives:

> ... to exchange ideas and experiences with other students from neighbouring schools ...

One staff member from the industrial arts department suggested funds be made available to prepare a national series of well-produced, high quality, half-hour television programs on different careers available, to supplement the careers advice already available in the school. Several staff supported this suggestion on hearing from him that a similar series has operated successfully in the United Kingdom. The Commonwealth employment officer suggested a careers officer to help co-ordinate career visits among the several high schools in the district. Such a move could strengthen school-industry links.

As a general comment on the current pattern of school-community

relationships, the president of the Parents' and Citizens' Association stated:

> Dramatic changes shock people into avoiding them. (You) won't get anywhere by assaulting people and telling them they are wrong even if they are.

On the other hand, the science master indicated that maybe radical changes were better rather than having 'little changes creeping up on you'.

What are the conclusions to be drawn from this study?

Before any changes are made in current practice the question must be asked about the extent to which parents and other members of the community should be involved in the school. The 'community of the school' is best able to answer this question. It also needs to be answered at a state system level as well as locally, given the fact that the money provided for education is administered centrally and that the Minister for Education is accountable to Parliament for its administration. With the decentralisation of responsibility in the state system, the question also needs to be answered at the regional level. During the preparation of this case study some staff members raised the question, but without coming to firm conclusions except that they would like to have more contact with the parents of those students who were having difficulties. The reason for this contact was to try to minimise or overcome the problems such students encountered.

It is notable that, in the last five years, there have been four instances of parental involvement at the planning and organisational level of the school curriculum. Is maintenance of the *status quo* the best policy? People interviewed at this school think not. However, there are many opinions on how to change the *status quo*. The principal, with long years of experience in education, twelve of them as a principal, is concerned that any change must have as its central aim the direct benefit of the student in the classroom. He wrote for the school appraisal:

> It has been evident that the staff of the school are prepared to progress with caution - this caution being the outcome of their experience with sudden sweeping changes. There is also evident a degree of cynicism towards changes based on flimsy educational evidence, often emanating from sources which are not in contact with the general range of adolescents.

> However, the staff has been prepared at all times to examine carefully proposals for changes in education and to provide constructive criticism for the architects of such schemes.
>
> As well, they have taken the initiative in areas where educational merit exists and this has resulted in new patterns of school curriculum.

The principal has supported staff who have taken the initiative in developing contacts with parents and other members of the community - such as preparing particular programs at the school, meeting parents to give careers talks, surveying parent opinion or organising school excursions. Staff members know that suggestions they make in this regard will have a sympathetic hearing and that it will be up to them to carry them out.

Changes in policy regarding school-community relations should be based on the needs of students, teachers, and parents and result in improving the quality of life in the school. If parents and other members of the community are to work with teachers in planning, implementing and evaluating the curriculum, they must be knowledgeable about the school and how it operates. To achieve this, students, teachers, parents, and other members of the community need to know more of one another's aspirations and expectations in regard to both the process of schooling and how it is conducted.

DUFFY PRIMARY SCHOOL

A.C.T.

SUMMARY

* An A.C.T. primary school board wishes to gauge parent opinion of school policy, curriculum and environment and to increase involvement. The school board decides to hold meetings in parents' homes where they may feel more at home, and to facilitate this creates 25 neighbourhood cells in its catchment zone.
* Each cell led by a parent facilitator.
* Use of specialised professional help from Canberra College of Advanced Education School of Teacher Education in the planning stage and for the briefing of facilitators.
* Meetings held and information relayed back to the school board.
* Outcomes of program.

BACKGROUND

Duffy Primary School is an open plan primary school with 580 students, situated some 10 kilometres from the centre of Canberra and opened in 1973.

As Duffy was one of the first two fully open plan schools in Canberra some parents were suspicious of the different learning/teaching strategies and organisation involved in an open plan school. By 1976 when the principal, Kalle Peljo, and nearly half the staff were new, these suspicions had not been adequately allayed, and the staff, with the full backing of the school board, decided to try to increase parental knowledge of the school's programs and to get as many as possible involved in helping the school.

A weekly newsletter was started which dealt with educational matters such as the teaching of reading and mathematics, homework and other organisational items. The Parents' and Citizens' Association (PCA)

meetings also allocated time for educational, as distinct from business matters. With encouragement from staff, some parents have become involved in listening to children read and as resource people for the electives program. Others limit their involvement to attending the weekly child-centred assemblies, parent-teacher nights and other school functions. The school board meetings are advertised as 'open' meetings, but few parents have attended.

In 1976 a school planning conference of 25 teachers and 25 parents was responsible for setting in motion plans for the development of clear school goals and aims. The process took over a year and involved the staff, the members of the school board, and the PCA executive. One product of the exercise was the Duffy Primary School statement which incorporates the school's aims, goals, organisation for learning, resources, curriculum, and parent involvement. A copy of this statement is made available to all parents.

Only three parents are represented on the school board. In 1976 these members admitted that they could not possibly know how far they represented the aspirations and expectations of the school parents or the appropriateness of the school's goals and aims. They felt that such knowledge was essential if they were to contribute in a realistic and constructive way to board discussions and decisions. In addition, all board members recognised the need for open two-way communication with parents. Consequently the board decided to hold a series of small parent meetings in parents' homes in all the neighbourhoods served by the school. This community involvement project, the focus of this report, developed along lines similar to those used successfully at the Aranda Primary School in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

INITIATIVES

The school board in the ACT, consisting of the principal, two teachers, three parents, and an appointee of the ACT Schools Authority, has a wide responsibility for determining educational policy including curriculum, assessing physical, monetary and staffing needs, and for satisfying childrens' parents' and teachers' needs. The school board decided, with the staff, to create the community involvement project. As the board's chairman, Mrs Rosemary Messenger, commented:

> We had a feeling of not performing our functions properly. There was very little input from the community supposedly being represented.

Although communication had been developed with parents, it was essentially one way, and neither the board nor the school was getting much feedback.

AIMS AND FOCUS

The aim of the community involvement project was to create two-way communication between the school and the parents in the hope that both the school and the board would better understand the parents' wishes and aspirations, and would be able to take appropriate action. In a letter to parents the board stated that one of its major tasks '... is to work with the school community in determining the future of the school ...', and as a result had

> enlisted the aid of a number of parents, the staff and the PCA committee, in an effort to involve as many members of the school community as possible in discussions of what they think of the educational program of the school and what, if any, changes they would like to see at the school in the future.

The decision to hold family meetings in parents' homes - on their 'home-ground' as it were - aimed at obtaining an informal, open atmosphere, in which parents, teachers and board members would take a full part. The decision to use parents as facilitators for each group was also aimed at creating informality and ease amongst parents, as 'equals' and neighbours.

STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

The board divided their catchment zone into 25 areas or cells with a parent working as a facilitator with small groups of other parents in each cell. The facilitator's job was to approach some 12 neighbourhood families with children at the school, and set up meetings. The facilitators were briefed by Bill Mulford of Canberra CAE on group organisation, group dynamics and general guidelines for organising the meetings. There followed a preliminary meeting of facilitators, the board and the staff, which dealt with the agenda and possible conflicts which might occur, and ways of obviating them. From all reports the meetings proceeded with minimal conflict.

Parents were first invited to the neighbourhood meetings by a letter

sent with the school newsletter and this was followed by a personal visit by the facilitator. After the meetings the facilitator returned a summary to the board which drew up an overview of the opinions expressed. Next, an open meeting of the PCA was held to discuss the findings. This was attended by 35 parents.

THE PROGRAM

Twenty-five meetings were held. These varied remarkably in attendance, the nature of topics discussed, and their perceived value. Of the school's 340 families 42 per cent were represented and 222 people attended the meetings. Rosemary Messenger thought the numbers attending were, in some cells, disappointing:

> Other than the facilitator and the PCA executive member, some groups consisted of only one or two parents - this was very disappointing for us and depressing for those facilitators.

But far more attended these meetings than normal PCA meetings and they became engaged in the discussions. They also offered more opportunity for discussion than PCA nights and developed a community consensus atmosphere which was missing from the school open nights where parents are engaged individually. In some cases poor attendance may have been due to baby-sitting problems, especially in single parent families. At meetings the range of topics discussed was wide and many lively meetings went on for three or four hours. Most discussion centred upon the subject matter of the curriculum, school organisation, and open plan. Also widely discussed were excursions, discipline, and questions related to the organisational structure of the school, evaluation and parent organisations.

It is quite obvious that the matters raised were ones that were of considerable concern to parents, and the board, appraised of the feedback, decided that

> specific questions raised at the various neighbourhood meetings be answered in future issues of the newsletter.

In consequent editions of the newsletter articles appeared on acoustics, general curriculum, pupil record cards, reading schemes, handwriting (two articles), mathematics (four articles), homework and transition to high school. Parents' attention was also drawn to the curriculum guidelines and other school policy matters in the parents' section of the school library. The board itself took up issues where policy needed clarification -

evaluation, planning conferences, methods of indicating children's progress to parents - or inadequate facilities or resources: buildings, funds, accommodation and parking. In addition, a school planning day was used to develop a program of sequential physical education and to co-ordinate the music program - problems raised at the parent meetings. Staff development sessions were initiated by the principal on reporting to parents and on the school-wide sequential health program.

PROBLEMS

1. Parent and teacher participation

Despite the considerable energy involved in organising the program of community involvement, the extent of parent participation was limited; less than half the families were represented. The parents were generally pleased with the way the meetings were run and had ample opportunity to contribute. But with 25 co-opted facilitators it is not always possible to find people of sufficient calibre or enthusiasm and there were almost inevitably differences between the cells in overall effectiveness.

The board's timetable allowed a month from the time of sending the initial letter to parents to the facilitator's return of information in reports to the board for correlation and summary. In the event, this was found to be too short a time for many facilitators. The last meeting was not, in fact, held until a month after the facilitators should have returned their reports and the last report was some two months 'late'. The pressure on the facilitators was fairly intensive and only half attended the meeting at the school after the neighbourhood meetings.

Some teachers did not attend neighbourhood meetings although all were involved in the planning and kept informed of developments. Involvement of teachers beyond what are the normally perceived boundaries of their roles into areas of restricted prior experience is often difficult to accomplish. Although 17 of the 25 staff did attend, a sizeable minority - some new to the school - did not.

The traditional inferiority complex that some parents have in their relationships with teachers was generally overcome, or overcome to a large extent because of the open atmosphere of the meetings. The presence of teachers at meetings was seen by parents as crucial. It reinforced the importance the school attached to meeting parents and gave the meeting itself a certain éclat.

2. Information

The feedback of information has definitely been very useful to the school and the board in establishing priorities. But what surprised the board was the high level of uncritical acceptance:

> It was surprising to discover the low level of understanding in the community about the school and the high level of concern that the school was doing the best by the children.

The board, in constant touch with sources of information at the school and involved in decision making that requires constant in-put of related information, is well informed and engaged in fairly sophisticated educational discussion. Most parents are unaware of educational issues at this level of complexity. In fact, one of the major needs exposed by the program was a need for the continuous provision of information to parents to bring them to a stage of informed involvement. Whether this is possible through the passive mechanism of the newsletter and its erratic distribution - how many finish up in gum trees? - and whether sufficient impetus exists for another round of neighbourhood 'cell' meetings, despite Rosemary's desire for them to be on a regular basis, is debatable. The school newsletter and other vehicles for parent involvement had not succeeded, prior to the neighbourhood meetings, in bringing many of the parents to the entry level of informed educational debate. Rosemary Messenger believes, in hindsight, that:

> ... the community needs more information before it can discuss school matters in an informed manner.

If she were starting again, she would 'provide more information earlier - before the neighbourhood meetings'.

FACTORS IN THE SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM

The ACT Schools Authority gives school boards a large degree of

autonomy in managing their schools. This places them in a good position to act with and on the staff's behalf to help the school overcome problems. As a result of their initiatives at Duffy the board is in a better position to establish priorities, plan developments and make decisions. Thus the board and the staff, through consultation, have determined their appropriate areas of responsibility and action. For many of the teachers there has been a better understanding developed of parents' wants and needs. One teacher commented:

> I didn't realise how inadequate parents feel to help their children with their education.

Another undoubted factor has been the enthusiasm of the board and PCA executive. The fairly small boards have a high calibre of membership in most ACT schools, and Duffy is no exception. Their energy, backed up by the enthusiasm of an involved PCA dealing with issues closely related to the direct welfare of the children, is of inestimable value to the school.

There is, in ACT schools, a high degree of consciousness amongst administrators and aspiring administrators of the value of certification, both for the skills and information it can impart and for promotion prospects. Many administrators are engaged in post-graduate work in education at the Canberra College of Advanced Education School of Education. The College's emphasis upon field studies has provoked considerable school-based investigation projects which are of value to the school and, if necessary, may be supported by other students. Their close relationships with the College give the schools access to professional advice (in this case from Bill Mulford) and this, in return, keeps the College personnel in close touch with reality.

FUTURE

One of the school's assistant principals, Bill Atkinson, is carrying out a survey of parents in an attempt to help evaluate the project. The findings, which are part of a Canberra CAE Master of Education field study, will also be presented to the board as a source of information. Indications are that there will be a high reply rate. Many of the returns have already indicated that the program was favourably received by most parents.

TRAINING KIT FOR GOVERNORS IN THE U.K.

prepared by Barbara Bullivant

reprinted from 'Where', March 1978.

When the recommendations of the *Taylor Report* on the composition of school governing boards are implemented, many more people will become involved in school government. Many of them will have no recent involvement with education and may not be used to committee procedure. Even people who are employed in the education service, or who have served as governors before, may need to learn new skills in co-operating with their new partners and working with a changed concept of school government.

The Taylor Committee recognised that people holding other forms of public appointments, such as magistrates and councillors, receive training, and they thought it important that school governors should also be trained. They therefore recommended 'that all local education authorities should be required to ensure that initial and in-service courses are available for governors'. They also recommended that:

' i. all governors should have a short period of initial training as soon as this is practicable;

ii. all governors should attend in-service training courses regularly;

iii. a person to be designated by the LEA should be responsible for coordinating the training of school governors.'

The Committee added 'we see merit in the suggestion that courses should, if possible, be provided at national and local level through radio and television, and by the Open University'. They thought that teachers' centres could provide a valuable back-up information service. 'We also think that there is scope for the governing body to build up its own collection of relevant books and documents (eg. the LEA's conditions of service relating to teachers).'

There is much information which it would be useful for all governors to have - about the history and structure of the education service, the financing of education, the aims and techniques employed in teaching and organising schools, about pastoral care, the design and care of buildings, the welfare of employees and pupils, and the law relating to schools. Most of this could be included in a 'handbook for governors', or in radio and televisions broadcasts, which would be available even in areas of scattered population where it might be difficult to organise a course.

Useful as this might be for conveying basic information, the Taylor Committee recognised that 'governors need contact with members of other governing bodies'. They need to meet, to exchange problems and experiences, to learn about the local system, local problems and provisions, to be able to ask questions and discuss issues. While teachers and councillors have opportunities for meeting other colleagues who are also governors, the parent- and the community-governor may have few such opportunities unless a course is arranged for them.

zoe community school tasmania

SUMMARY

* Large amount of parent support necessary for a small innovative community school.

* Flexibility required of new school to deal with initial problems.

* Extensive use of community's resources by school.

BACKGROUND

Zoe Community School began in 1975 and is in its fourth year of operation. It is directed by the two full-time staff and a committee of parents of children currently attending the school. Its 25 primary students are housed in a church-owned community hall in Ferntree, a small settlement on the flanks of Mt. Wellington on the western edge of Hobart. The hall is almost surrounded by tall mountain gums, often shrouded in mist and covered in winter by a dusting of snow.

The hall is ideal for the school, having a large central area with a stage at one end and smaller rooms all along one side. These rooms are used as an office, an art room, a music room and two quiet rooms.

The school is independent and fairly stable after tumultuous beginnings.

INITIATION

The school is the brainchild of Gregor Lasch, a teacher who found himself increasingly dissatisfied by the Departmental system. He canvassed the possibility of an alternative school, less formally structured. Encouraged by several of his friends, he eventually advertised public meetings so that people could hear his ideas. In the process he received

support from a number of people who were able to offer influential help and advice in founding the school. Once begun, the school was to be widely publicised through meetings, on television and radio, in newspapers and through visits of teacher trainees, parents and university lecturers.

Gregor worked hard to establish a clientele from people he heard were not satisfied with the State system. One mother recalls that:

> Gregor came to see us. We had never heard of the school 'til he arrived at our house one day. He had apparently heard we were having difficulties and were thinking about moving the children, so he came to see us ... (our son) used to come home in tears, develop stomach aches, didn't want to go to school and was obviously terribly unhappy. So we thought - why not give it a go?

AIMS AND FOCUS OF THE SCHOOL

Zoe is a Greek word meaning "life". The inference intended is that Zoe is a school where people learn to live and begin a process which will continue for the rest of their lives.

Gregor's educational philosophy has been strongly influenced by A.S. Neill and Jean Piaget. He claims Neill's "Summerhill" 'was the book that changed my life', although in attempting to apply Neill's ideas, admits to some reservation:

> He (Neill) had the children 24 hours a day. We didn't. We realised (the need) to have the school and the home as complementary to each other; where the values were much the same. If you had different values at home from school, you had a lot of problems. We had a lot of problems at Zoe for that reason ...

Early on Gregor received substantial Schools Commission Innovations funding for a programme called "Piaget in Action". The objective of this project was to implement Jean Piaget's idea that a child's capacity is developed through direct experience and, when ready, the child will naturally turn to the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy as an extension of his own creative development. Consequently, the school needed enrichment materials to stimulate the students' interests, which were largely met from the Schools Commission Innovations funds.

The emphasis upon experience, both to prepare for and stimulate

voluntary readiness, has implications for the school's operation.

Gregor believes that:

> learning is an individual matter, and you can't really develop a learning programme on a mass basis.

Zoe attempts to give individual attention to all the children, acknowledging that no two are the same and that their needs will vary from day to day and week to week. As a consequence, the school's activities are extremely flexible. Gregor feels very strongly about a few issues:

> One in particular being the relatively unstructured school system ... that's what our school is all about ... and if that is not acceptable to parents I'd resign.

John Ward, who came to Zoe in late 1976 and is the present coordinator, believes that the autonomy of the teachers leads to a high level of personal commitment and job satisfaction. A parent finds the school appealing because it meets its aims:

> I like the individualised approach. The standard isn't what all seven or eight year olds are doing; it's the child himself. You look at the child at the beginning of the term and at the end, and look at the programme in relation to the child's ability. I like that. I like the mobility of the school. It is fairly easy, even at the beginning of the day, to decide - it's a nice day: let's go on an excursion.

The school places great emphasis upon the quality of relationships between teachers, children and parents as a natural development of its philosophy. Mark Sayer, a teacher, is emphatic that more than anything else the teachers need to be able to relate to children as individuals and create an environment attractive to children. Children, he feels, should like to go to school because this will be most conducive to their learning. A new parent was attracted by the obvious happiness of children. The school:

> ... seemed to be very relaxed. There was absolutely no use of fear or intimidating force to bring children into line. Rather it was the opposite - using a great deal of affection to win the confidence of children.

The emphasis upon individual attention places a great burden on the staff and they in turn have very high expectations of support from the parents and the community. Gregor has found that:

> You need more people to make this individual system work - you can't afford more teachers (but) you can involve parents who have strong special interests in being involved with their children's education. We felt we could involve parents in a more meaningful way than working in a tuckshop. Some of our parents have been just as valuable as the professional staff in some areas.

John and Mark also believe that the parents can be of great assistance. They believe in a three-sided triangle of teacher, parent and child, in which all benefit from one another. Mark is strong in his conviction that:

> I wouldn't be involved in the school unless the parents were pretty heavily committed. I just think it is very important that a parent shall have a big role in their child's education.

The difficulties of establishing boundaries to roles and deciding who takes initiatives are more clearly illuminated at 'open' schools like Zoe. The very openness leads to misunderstanding and increases the potential for conflict. In the early days at Zoe, in what was a novel venture with little precedence to refer to, the pressures on Gregor were high. He found 'too much involvement' or dramas which pulled the school apart, as too many people thought 'they knew all the answers and solutions'. Unlike the State system, the fact that the parents had selected the principal and were, in a small school, almost personally paying him and the teacher, put them in a position where 'there is too much power, perhaps, with parents ...'

Gregor believes that the teacher should have a great deal of influence in the school's development and was prepared to resign if parents found his ways too unstructured:

> They can be involved - as long as they accepted a few basic ideas about the school's philosophy. Zoe was an option in a spectrum of schools, and it was an unstructured one - and if you didn't like it you could leave.

A lot of parents did.

In the first two years there was frequent mismatching between the school and parents who expected a more formalised and structured school. Some parents stuck with the school as long as they could and tried to compensate for the lack of instruction by support at home but this role reversal confused the children. The different values and expectations extended the gulf. Frequent meetings failed to bridge the gap. Gregor refused to betray his principles and parents took their children away.

The basic anxiety of the parents was that their children were not learning basic skills. While the school had set itself the challenge of demonstrating that children could be motivated to read and write without formal structures or the teacher having to resort to pressure, the parents were becoming increasingly anxious. A mother admits how much her child loved the school, but:

> ... he never looked at the academic side. Although it was available, it was the children's choice. They would do their own work at their own pace when they were ready. But he just didn't, because he wasn't interested, and nobody seemed to mind, so he didn't even bother trying; he just played the whole year.

A major error was an initial decision to take children of the upper primary age - 8 to 11 years. These children were already steeped in the ritual, organisation and expectations of their State primary school. With some, the freedom of Zoe went to their heads; they lacked any previous experience of self-motivation. Others responded to the lack of direction. A few children reacted rather spectacularly. There was some vandalism and shoplifting, readily noticeable in a very small semi-rural community. Relations between the school and the local community reached rock bottom; a child was expelled and several were withdrawn. One mother attributes her son's spate of vandalism to boredom and the lack of stimulation or direction. At this time Zoe could have folded. It didn't, because the school responded to the parents' expectations. Gregor took two initiatives. The school tried hard to attract younger children, untarnished by the experience of State schools, and accepted the need for some teacher initiatives in basic skills areas, especially reading and writing.

Gregor admits that:

> ... if you can't teach children to read and write well, then people will withdraw their children. We had relied upon the idea of the child coming to reading in his own time too much ... (now) we don't pressurize them too much, not to begin with, but after a period of time we just use a little bit of persuasion.

A mother who subsequently enrolled her children at Zoe epitomizes the parent attitude that must have influenced Gregor to change:

> Gregor came down to the preschool and asked would I be interested in sending my six year old as they were taking in younger kids. There were a few questions I felt needed to be asked before I sent my child there. I said to Gregor: "I don't want a child coming out of grade six level and being an illiterate little brat". (I asked) Did they have a good working knowledge of the basic skills - the 3 R's? Behaviour wise I was a little worried about this freedom thing.

SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

The activities of parents at Zoe are focused upon involvement in the school's educational programme. There are 17 families with children at Zoe. Four or five parents run regular specific programmes of art, music, pottery, photography, small group help with writing and work recognition cards. There are hardly ever less than three parents at the school at any time. Others help less directly. There is a list of suggestions for parents; how they can help in the kitchen with children, by taking them for walks to look at plants or animals, by reading stories, talking to them, looking after them on the swings and just generally helping as needed. A mother living close by brought the children home to do cooking and another virtually babysits the whole school where there is a staff meeting after school.

The school programme is highly orientated to direct experience, both locally and further afield. Parents go along on the bus to local places of interest and help in preparation for the five or six major camping expeditions a year. The children are closely involved in preparing for the camps, buying food, packing utensils, getting sleds ready and generally organising. On a recent camping expedition to Maydena several parents went along and were invaluable. As Mark says, there is:

> ... a feeling of just a big family each night. We've got a lot of very young kids, so we bed them down each night and try to create a sense of unity for the security of everybody.

The parents' activities are coordinated by the teachers. Both Gregor and Mark see the need to utilize the parents according to their abilities, accepting that some may feel more comfortable in the kitchen and others fixing doors or helping in a practical way.

> ... one parent rigged up a marvellous net for the children to bounce in, which involved quite a bit of work.

There are limitations to the involvement of parents in the school's daily programme. In half the families both parents work and some have a reluctance to become involved; they don't feel they are good enough, qualified enough, to do something. Gregor finds it:

> ... difficult to get some parents involved because they see school as a forbidding place where they cannot be involved through lack of skills. So we've really tried to break down those barriers.

The teachers do respect the right of parents to make suggestions as to the sort of things that their child should or should not be doing. Parents who want more or less formal work can and do approach the teachers and a decision is made. Gregor emphasises the importance of discussing children's progress with parents. Nevertheless, the decision is still made within a framework which precludes very formal learning programmes.

While parents do take the initiative, there are professional areas which the teachers see as being their responsibility. Mark believes:

> ... there are some things teachers can do more easily than others. That's why teachers are here and parents out working. The parents have to be fully aware of what I'm doing for them to take part. There are some things that I do like to call my own and I wouldn't like people to come in and go straight into it, because they're not fully aware of what the situation is like.

With the very small number of families involved, the pressure on parents to help is fairly high and in return the school offers its support to the parents in a variety of ways. Some regular teacher helpers are paid a small salary, which is particularly helpful where they need the money. Others help for nothing if they don't need the money.

Another aspect is the fee structure. There is a lower limit of $350 a year, but above that people pay what they can afford, up to a limit of $650 per child.

The school bus is a vital tool for implementing the school's philosophy of spontaneity and creating direct experiences for children.

The teachers claim they could not function without it. Most visits are initiated by teachers, such as those to the City Library in Hobart, the Museum, the parks, the shops, the docks, etc., but topical matters of interest such as visiting ships, whales washed ashore, heavy snow falls, arise in discussions between teachers, children and parents at the morning meetings. In addition, the children go to Hobart bookshops in small groups in the bus and choose and buy books that interest them for the school's library.

> ... that experience is tied in with maths, because you consider prices and with the social experience of talking to the shop-keeper. Also the experience of (deciding) why would you spend your money on that sort of book: whether it is of passing interest. There was, for example, one book on sharks: it was about $30.00. After quite a lot of drama it was decided not to buy it and (this led) to talk about public libraries.

STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

* Formal. Zoe is incorporated under the Tasmanian Companies Act and its members are the teachers, parents and any others who are prepared to pay their $1.00 annual subscription. The chairman of the school board is a parent, Shirley Bartholomew. Once a week there is a staff meeting with the teachers at the school where the school's programmes are discussed. A finance committee deals with the economic management of the school.

There are monthly meetings of the staff and parents which are held in parents' homes. These discuss a wide range of issues and were the scene of the frequent lengthy debates about the appropriateness of the curriculum and methods in the early two years of the school. Pressure on parents to attend these meetings is fairly considerable and no subjects are taboo: programmes, teaching methods, differences and grievances, individual children and finances are discussed, and plans are laid for excursions or visits. The relaxed atmosphere of such meetings has a very strong binding effect upon the school community.

* Informal. A lot of the contact between the staff and the parents is informal. Because the students are drawn from all over suburban Hobart the bus picks them up and drops them off daily.

Consequently, the teachers who drive the bus have the opportunity to contact most of the parents directly. Any problems about the school or the child or any information can be passed on at this contact time. John believes they see three-quarters of the parents every day and all of them at least once a week this way. In addition, there is the frequent contact at the school and a fortnightly newspaper produced by the students.

Every morning the teachers and children meet with the parents who are at school to discuss the day's activities, talk about anything that concerns them, such as the week's theme, the day's visitors or excursions, sing a song together and perhaps listen and talk to visitors. Older children talk about the films they would like to book, and listen to a story or experience of one of the younger children. This is the one occasion when the school community comes together in the day.

* Social. The parents who work at the school and attend meetings also have fairly tight social ties with one another. The monthly meetings are social occasions, often lightened with a glass of wine and the parents who go on camps and excursions find themselves bound closely into the school society. It is not at all rare for teachers to have meals at the parents' homes, and:

> ... because it's such a small school the teachers are delighted to come ... everybody is in a rather different relationship and it's rather a nice fun thing.

There are also a range of social functions in the year, such as barbeques and winebottling and an annual ox roast which is held with the purpose of raising money to supplement the teachers' salaries. (Neither teacher is paid State award wages.)

There is considerable interaction between parents and children out of school. Children stay at each other's homes, go on outings and to birthday parties. 'Someone has a birthday party; well parents turn up and spend the afternoon there as well'. A mother remarked that:

> ... quite often I find myself with two or three extra kids on board, or tonight with two less, and we find we spend holidays away quite often and other parents and kids come and spend time with us. So we are getting this real sense of community. I am finding a real peer group, not just amongst the kids but also with their parents as well, and this appeals to me.

The high proportion of single parents of Zoe students can perhaps be attributable to the support that Zoe parents tend to give each other. Gregor quite clearly sees this as 'the school community' acting to support each other. Single parents feel they can get help from the parents. A single mother had to go into hospital and was concerned about what to do with her children. Another family just took the children while she was away. But like all schools, Zoe figures more highly in the priorities of some parents than others. As Mark says:

> ... there are some people who put in so much for the school, always working overtime, and others who do their bit but could do a lot more.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

After five very tiring years as initiator before the school started and key person in its early years, Gregor Lasch felt the need for further study and recuperation. The event was not heralded without some nervousness, but after three years the school was well established, a lot of the initial difficulties had been ironed out and the parents felt more secure. There was a feeling that:

> ... this is the test. If a school like this is worth having, other people have got to be able to make it and stick together...

That this togetherness already existed has been referred to.

Succession has the habit of being the Achilles heel of schools built on personalities: nobody denies Gregor's dominance and the dependency upon him in the early years. Gregor attributes the smooth transfer of responsibility on his leaving to the stability offered by the chairman, Shirley Bartholomew. She attributes it to the care taken in selecting the new teacher, Mark Sayer, who is recognised as a first-class teacher with many skills. The changeover structures were carefully planned. John became increasingly involved in organisation of the school at the same time as Gregor dropped away from board and parent meetings. A collegiate decision-making structure has eventuated with John and Mark acting as joint coordinators.

There have been several outcomes of the changeover. There is a larger element of organisation in the approach to teaching, including the development of the morning meetings, programme planning and the newspaper.

Far from the school collapsing on Gregor's leave-taking, it appears to have realised some of its strengths. Some of the parents have accepted more responsibility than they did before and the responsibility for the total running of the school has been distributed more widely.

PROBLEMS

The majority of problems which faced Zoe occurred in the first two years and related to the children recruited, the expectations of parents and the school's operation.

In its initial years the school attracted children who had problems, including some who were 'highly disturbed'. The children were taken out of economic necessity, which Gregor later admitted was a fatal mistake.

> ... if I was advising anyone about starting a school I'd say "for goodness sake don't fall into that trap. Put up with a smaller group and less money".

He recalls one child who could have possibly destroyed the school. He created problems all the time and the level of aggression rose. Vandalism at the time created a very deep rift with the local community with the potential of causing the school to lose the lease on the hall and the whole school. Yet, because of their concern for individual children, the school was vulnerable to parents' requests. Now the school and the parents mutually protect themselves with a one month's probation period.

Some of the parental expectations of the school in the first two years were incongruent with the school's philosophy. A lot of parents wanted more structure. Because the school had been set up as an alternative, Gregor was naturally unwilling to change his emphasis upon minimum structure and a lack of pressure on children. One parents admits that they were searching for a 'free' atmosphere at the same time as having their children 'extended' intellectually. In their desire for the former they failed to acknowledge that Zoe was not what they were searching for. Zoe had not failed them; their idea of what Zoe would provide was erroneous. However, they all acknowledged that their children had developed socially.

Two initial errors were made by Gregor. The first was to take in

upper primary age children already socialised into behaviour expectations and lacking in initiative who could not cope with the freedom of Zoe. The second was to underestimate the importance to even the most supportive parents of the school of their children making some appreciable progress in the 3 R's. Yet even here Gregor can quite justifiably quote the need for extreme patience with some children who are extremely introverted. In one particular case:

> ... it took him nearly two years before he would get involved in reading and writing, because you couldn't force him. He was stubborn as a mule and would just disappear - you wouldn't see him for the rest of the day. The more you pushed him the more he withdrew. A child in the system would have got worse because he is withdrawn and sensitive. But it's been worth waiting for him ...

In three years the school became very reliant on Gregor because he planned it two years before it started and knew everything that had happened. He is the dominant personality who brought the school to its present stability but who could, equally as easily, have wrecked it if he had kept rigidly to his first teaching principles and organisation. Gregor relied on a few people for advice and support, but failed to delegate much of the school's operation and to broaden responsibility in the way that Mark and John have done, incidentally realising a lot of strength in the parents.

A possible problem lies in the transfer of children to secondary school. Only a few students have left for secondary schools and all had prior experience in State primary schools. Most ex-Zoe students go to Kingston High School where the Principal, Mr. Eldridge, finds that the children have had no problem settling in. The high school is, in any case, very open and encouraging to parents and children to talk things over. The school is well organised into small pastoral care groups of 16 to 18 children who stay in that group right through high school. It creates a similar close bond between the teacher and child that exists at Zoe. Zoe obviously raises parental expectations of close contact with the school; Mr. Eldridge finds that all Zoe parents are well known to him.

FACTORS IN THE SUCCESSFUL OPERATION OF THE SCHOOL

The school has proved itself able to adapt. The school's susceptibility to parent pressure, which saved it, and Gregor's smooth divestment of responsibility are referred to above.

The school has received crucial and continuing support from outsiders and parents vitally interested in the school's welfare. Gregor admits that in the beginning:

> ... we had a lot of tricky situations (with groups of parents and others) and in some cases I wasn't able to cope with them on my own. I just needed somebody to talk to with some official position in the school. I know how important it is to have somebody there (whom) I can ring up at any time and say - "look, we've got a problem".

Shirley Bartholomew is the present person in this position and she also does an inordinate amount of promotion for the school with parent groups, at the University and on radio and television.

> I see it as a personal responsibility. I would like to think that some of the things we have learnt in running the school can be of benefit to the larger system of schooling in general.

The school has received exceptional support from others such as Ken Brooks, the ex-Director of Adult Education, Barbara Manning of the Theatre-in-Education, and Diana Ward, a Schools Commission consultant, and the anonymous person who in the beginning donated the $9,000 bus to Zoe.

The bus is a vital element in Zoe's success. The use of the term 'community' in the school's title does not indicate a geographical concept of community at Ferntree. Only a few children come from there. The school is more a community of people with similar ideas, a school initiating a 'community'. The parent community is composed of people who have particular ideas about the way children should approach 'life' and do not agree with the more conventional school's approach. The bus is the life-blood of the school, daily transporting the children from fairly wide-flung homes and giving the school programme the flexibility and spontaneity that the teachers value so highly.

The school gives a great deal of satisfaction to the people associated with it. The children are happy at school and even a mother who finally took her children away from Zoe admits:

> I really believe the year at Zoe did him more good than any other year at any school. He really blossomed.

For the teachers it is their autonomy and job satisfaction that is important. Mark feels he has:

> ... a big effect on the way the school runs and my personality really shows up in the school.

and John values the fact that:

> ... the decisions we make are the decisions that run the school.

The value they place on this freedom has to be set against the very low salaries they receive for their work. John admits he couldn't keep a family on it. The parents' contributions are vital to the school and they know it. Shirley Bartholomew found that something happened to her as a result of her involvement in Zoe:

> ... my own level of awareness (rose) about children's rights and what schooling can be all about. I find myself a much more useful person.

It has had other spinoffs too:

> ... having Lisa in Zoe made me think - "I must look around and find the high school in which she will flourish and it won't necessarily be the one closest to home; but I must put a bit of effort into it."

Gregor believes that the value placed on the parents by the school 'gives them more dignity' as people and a mother who moved 'from the sticks in the north west' just so her children could go to the school convincingly attests to the value that has been gained for her children and by herself. The mutual support also helps increase the parents' sense of worth.

FUTURE

Zoe has continued for almost four years because of the involvement and effort of a core group of very committed individuals, people who are

fully aware and have a firm belief in the ideals on which Zoe is based. The school's continued existence will be greatly dependent on the presence of such people within the school's community.

It is likely that Zoe will only be an alternative school for some parents and some children. Its very informality and lack of traditional school structures do not accord to most parents' preconception of what school should be: nor is it likely to in the future. The school is a community of common interest that complements other aspects of the families' lifestyles. It will continue to provide a very valuable alternative, both in the education it offers to some families and the ideas and alternatives that its community generates in the wider community.